U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

The Coastal Program

Success on Florida's Gulf Coast

Caring for Our Coastal Habitats

Wood stork **Photo: Corel Corp.**

Florida's Gulf Coast Resources

The 500 miles of coast line from Tampa Bay north and west to Perdido Bay includes 23 bays totaling over a million acres of open water. Dozens of rivers and creeks feed the numerous bays and estuaries via watersheds covering thousands of square miles, including the watersheds of both the Apalachicola and Suwannee rivers.

Within these bays is roughly one third of the sea grass beds of the Gulf of Mexico. The area also contains about one third of Florida's coastal marshes. This delicate fringe of subtropical habitat supports hundreds of species of birds, thousands of species of marine fishes and invertebrates, and is home to many species of threatened and endangered species including sea turtles, the Gulf sturgeon, beach mice, and the Florida manatee. It also provides socially and economically important recreational and commercial fisheries and a variety of other recreational opportunities.

Manatee
Photo: Galen Rathbun, USFWS

Providing Coastal Stewardship

Associated with these bountiful coastal resources are some of the most densely developed urban areas in the nation, and urban growth continues to increase at a nearly exponential rate. In addition, historic activities including dredging, filling, industrial practices, silviculture and agriculture have all altered habitats and resulted in losses of sea grass beds, marshes, river flood plains, and coastal upland forests.Restoration of altered habitats and preservation of existing pristine habitat are two objectives of the Coastal Program Both water and sediment quality have been degraded at some sites and their restoration, along with stormwater and point source renovation or improvement, may be needed. Finally, sometimes we may want to restore areas impacted by tropical storms and hurricanes, particularly where barrier island habitat is involved.

The Importance of Partnerships

The Service's pro-active Coastal Program attributes much of its success to the fact that it is non-regulatory. Instead, the program relies on voluntary partnerships to accomplish on-the-ground results. Any coastal environment (upland, wetland, or open water) can be the focus of a project to meet the goal of the program, which is to restore, enhance or protect fish and wildlife habitat.

We meet the challenges this goal presents by:

- Developing projects on both private and public lands.

- Creating partnerships that include Federal, State, and municipal governments, academic institutions, industries and businesses, conservation groups, and citizen volunteers.

- Providing technical assistance on projects where other Federal agencies are providing base funding. An example is the Corps of Engineers Section 206 Aquatic Restoration Program.

• Leveraging Coastal Program funds with other partner contributions to achieve at least a 3:1 funding ratio. Frequently the fund leveraging is even higher, maximizing environmental results for the dollars spent.

• Assisting partners to develop applications for Service grant programs, such as the Coastal Wetlands Grant and North American Waterfowl and Wetland Grant programs, as well as funding provided by other Federal and State agencies.

Program Benefits

Across the Florida Gulf Coast the program provides two full time Service ecologists, funding, and management and technical assistance to implement:

• Habitat protection and restoration

• Information and data gathering and analysis with partners

• Public outreach and education

Accomplishments to Date

The Florida Gulf Coastal Program is the newest of the Service's Coastal Program initiatives. Several significant accomplishments have already been initiated and/or completed. Some examples include:

• Restoring 60 acres of upland adjacent to Tampa Bay as part of the 1,079-acre *Wolf Creek Restoration Project* in partnership with Hillsborough County and the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

• Restoring 12 acres of Pensacola Bay habitat through *Project GreenShores.* Work includes placement of a lime rock reef, and replanting of sea grass and salt marsh.

• Planting of 57,000 sea oat seedlings on coastal dunes to provide island stabilization and important habitat for a variety of island-dependant species including the endangered beach mouse.

• Assessing the habitat conditions of the Palma Sola Bay causeway, restoring tidal circulation in the upper bay, and removing non-native invasive plants from the area. This project will expand sea grass beds and restore native wetland species.

• Assisting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, through technical assistance and funding to implement an aquatic restoration project pilot project in West Bay of St. Andrew Bay to reestablish nearly 1,000 acres of sea grass.

• Providing technical assistance for the City of Largo and other partners to enhance and restore wetlands and uplands in a city park. Assistance includes design review, location of funding sources, and a review of the proposal for grant assistance.

Brown pelican **Photo: USFWS**

• Providing Coastal Program grant support for curricula development and resource education of students, resource managers, landscape designers, architects, developers and planners. Partners include the Environmental Education Center and Gulf Coast Community College.

• Restoring Choctawhatchee Bay and coastal dune lakes shoreline. The project will restore emergent freshwater and salt marsh vegetation and intertidal habitat. Multiple partners are involved through the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance.

• Developing a sea grass protection and education project which will include the development of printed educational materials, placement of buoys to mark sea grass beds, and post-project evaluation of protected areas.

Looking Toward the Future

Projects currently being considered that would contribute toward the goals of the Florida Gulf Coastal Program include:

• Initiatives to address the impacts of urban stormwater runoff through retro-fitting, or advance placement of treatment facilities in order to restore or prevent chemical degradation of water and sediments in coastal aquatic habitats.

• Restoration of coastal uplands formerly intensively managed as silviculture lands by: reestablishment of the native long leaf pine/wire grass community; restoration of hydrology; and stabilization of watersheds to improve and protect water quality.

• Restoration of ten to twenty square miles of sea grass beds within the State's Big Bend Seagrass Aquatic Preserve, which is one of the largest sea grass beds in North America.

• Preservation of coastal urban forested wetlands to protect habitat and water quality.

• Assessment of the cumulative impacts of point source discharges in each of the project area bays and also of the effects that improving effluent discharges would have on water quality.

• Control of exotic invasive species.

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